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An Analysis of Mistakes in Written Assignments of Students of German

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Abstract

Problem statement: An analysis of mistakes in written assignments of students is being undertaken as a pilot study in a project concerned with the correction of errors by teachers.

Research questions: What mistakes do students of German as a foreign language make in their written assignments? What types of errors are made most frequently?

Purpose of the study: The aim of this study is to present the research project along with its preliminary findings. The project is based on the analysis of types and frequency of mistakes made by students of German as a foreign language in their written assignments.

Research methods:

- Analysis of mistakes in written assignments made by students of the German language
- Categorization of mistakes
- Statistical processing of data

Findings: The research is being carried out now and the data will be analysed by autumn 2014.

Conclusions: Final conclusions will be presented after the completion of the analysis.

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Keywords: correction; German; frequency and types of mistakes; mistakes and errors

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Introduction

The definition of mistake in foreign language classes has evolved significantly under the influence of dominant approaches to foreign language education (from behaviourist and cognitive to the communicative approach). The concept of mistake as an unacceptable deviation from a linguistic norm (Lindemann, 1995; Slavik, 1999) is outdated. Since the 1970s the term mistake has been considered necessary because it reflects students' perception of learning (Corder, 1967). Through mistakes students verify their hypotheses regarding the nature of the language they learn. Mistakes are the reflection of students' mental processes as well as necessary development indicators of students' interlanguage (Lindemann, 1995). The mistake therefore becomes a natural part of foreign language classes – it is not only tolerated, but even "welcome" as an opportunity for learning. However, the tolerance of mistakes must not lead to ignoring the correct form of the language, as failure to master formal aspects of a language leads to the inability to communicate (Gnutzmann, 1989). This is one reason the research into mistakes in foreign language discourse has lost nothing of its topicality.

The correction of mistakes ranks among the basic activities of foreign language teachers. Not only do they spend most of their working time doing this activity, but also their free time, although they often have a feeling that their efforts are as futile as the proverbial tilting at windmills. Students make mistakes constantly and the scope of mistakes is basically the same. Teachers themselves describe the correction of written assignments as an unpopular, time-consuming and burdensome task (Ivo, 1982, 39). The only reason they consent to do it is the indispensability and usefulness of corrected texts within foreign language classes to provide students with urgently needed feedback regarding their performance so that they can continue to improve. A once-attained competence can only be retained if repeated and practised constantly. When correcting mistakes, however, the teacher's focus of attention is usually on the evaluation and marking of the performance. The teacher often has neither the time nor energy to contemplate how to help a particular student find a successful, fast and individual way to make progress with a foreign language.

A mistake is an important "interim phase" of learning. Weimer stated as early as the 1920s that mistakes "through their inadequacy drive the ambitious human spirit towards new activities" "and can be used to promote student progress." (Weimer, 1926, 9) Edge (1994, 17) is also of the opinion that anything that is called a mistake can be looked upon as a step in learning, and we should therefore be grateful for them. Students need to be encouraged to experiment with language so that they can take further steps in learning. If students do not make mistakes, they are making no effort to improve their ways of expressing exactly what they want to say.

Making mistakes cannot be avoided in foreign language education. However, teachers' opinions on the role of mistakes vary greatly. Some consider making mistakes a negative phenomenon and the proof of insufficient diligence, talent, concentration and understanding of students, thus errors need to be suppressed and punished right away. However, other teachers consider making mistakes a natural phenomenon in the process of learning and stress especially their diagnostic value, an approach emphasized by, for instance, Nickel (1973, 8–24), who compares a flawed performance to a fever, in which even the doctor eventually sees a positive phenomenon for determining a diagnosis. For both the teacher and the student mistakes are food for thought – they provide teachers with information about the shortcomings in their planning of lessons, presentations and exercises, the quality of textbooks or the use of particular subject matter. Errors help teachers check to what extent their students have mastered learning as well as how appropriate the chosen teaching methods and materials, etc. are for their pupils. At the same time mistakes signal teachers their own possible methodological flaws. Mistakes inform students about their learning techniques and intensity, about the areas they still need to improve, and they also indicate the level which students have reached during their studies. The function of mistake in the process of learning is therefore informational and the goals of the work with mistakes is to gradually teach the student to use mistakes and their correction as another source for their learning. Students are expected to gradually learn to independently check the correctness of their utterances and to use dictionaries and language reference books to correct their written assignments, which is a basic prerequisite for being able to develop their knowledge of a language and put it into practice after finishing their institutional studies (Kulic, 1971 In Hendrich, 1988, 370).

Mistake diagnostics are complicated and problematic and they need to be considered from many different points of view. Incorrect forms always need to be assessed with regard to the context in which they arose (taking into account the age of the students, how long they have been studying, the presentation and practising of a certain skill in classes, teaching methods and many other criteria). Depending on the context we also assess the seriousness of mistakes and decide how they should be rectified. It is this approach to mistakes that distinguishes foreign language teachers from native speakers without philological and pedagogical training. Native speakers usually discover wrong forms fast and easily, but they are very often unable to explain to students why such forms are unacceptable. The advantage of native speakers is their sense of language. By contrast, this sense is not developed to such an extent in foreign language teachers, who are not native speakers of the language they teach, so there are cases in which they do not discern incorrect forms. Therefore, educators need to have constant contact with a foreign language environment as well as with native speakers, who they can turn to if they are uncertain about a particular question.

Analyses of mistakes provide important findings not only for students and teachers in schools, but also for authors of textbooks, syllabuses and tests. The causes of mistakes vary and many different factors are involved. When analysing mistakes, we can become aware of their probable causes, which enables us to focus on these reasons and to avoid these errors in the future.

Researches into mistakes at the Department of German Language and Literature in Hradec Kralove

At the Department of German Language and Literature of the Faculty of Education in Hradec Kralove we have been dealing with the analysis of mistakes in the process of learning the German language since 1990. We have looked at them from different points of view and have conducted several researches. It is clear that all our studies have taken us a step further regarding the issue of making mistakes. We gained our first experience with the processing of mistakes in a study with the goal of determining the frequency and type of the most common mistakes Czech students make when using the German language. We obtained data by analysing the written entrance examinations of applicants for the studies of the German language at the Faculty of Education in Hradec Kralove during 1990–1993. These tests were ideal research material for our purposes, as they had been written by students from different schools and diverse places. This factor increased the objectivity of the research because there were not simply random mistakes made from one school, one type of school or one region. Another fact that needs to be mentioned is that the respondents were motivated to achieve the best result of the written test possible, as all of them wanted to succeed and continue to study German. It could therefore be assumed that they had already devoted increasing attention to the studies of German at the secondary schools where they took their final school-leaving examinations. As it was possible to apply to several universities, the tests were also taken by students who had also been successful in entrance examinations at other types of universities (e.g. the University of Economics as well as faculties of philosophy, law schools, etc.) and who eventually did not enrol at the Faculty of Education in Hradec Kralove. That can also be considered significant because some people from both the professional and the lay public are of the opinion that studies at faculties of education are mainly chosen by secondary school students with poorer study results. The importance of our research also lies in the fact that it was begun at the beginning of the new era of foreign language teaching after the revolution of 1989, and it surveys the results achieved by applicants who had gone through uniform lessons in German (i.e. exposed to the same textbooks, the same number of lessons in the timetable and similar teaching methodology of the pre-1989 education system) and later on the first students of the new type of teaching (since 1990 teachers at all types of schools have been allowed to choose their own textbooks and study materials; more lessons have been allocated for language teaching and modern means of teaching employed; in addition, foreign languages were increasingly taught by native speakers). Furthermore, the applied research method was devised in such a way so that it could be used anytime on a new sample of individuals.

The research included 486 tests. In evaluating the results, first of all we described in detail the way the tests were given and scored, after which statistical calculations were processed. The results of our research showed the legitimacy of dividing the written entrance examination into three parts (dictation, gap fill and translation), with each of these testing a different scope of knowledge and thus irreplaceable. In our research we mainly focused on

mistakes in translation. For this purpose we devised our own methodology of encoding grammatical mistakes in German, which could in the future be instrumental in the computational processing of grammatical mistakes in more comprehensive researches of this issue.

There were additional ways to arrange and record the individual mistakes. As we were mainly interested in grammatical errors (especially morphological), we abandoned the recording of mistakes by sentence elements. A unit of its own in our set was formed by the so-called word forms, as these individual units needed to be quantified with other morphological categories within which the particular forms are created (Tesitelova, 1987). In our basic division we first carried out the encoding of parts of speech.

The rough encoding of mistakes was carried out by marking each phenomenon with a numerical code, the first number of which indicated what part of speech a particular form belonged to: 1 – noun; 2 – adjective; 3 – pronoun; 4 – numeral; 5 – verb; 6 – adverb; 7 – preposition; 8 – conjunction; 9 – other mistakes (particles, negation, word order, spelling, etc.). This means that for instance all mistakes concerning nouns had a code starting with number 1. However, for our research such a scale was insufficient and it was necessary to encode mistakes in more detail. As similar mistakes often occurred in translation for all parts of speech, we tried to mark in a uniform way these repeated mistakes resulting mainly from a lack of vocabulary knowledge, thus words were left out in the text, or a word replaced with an incorrect one. If respondents did not translate a word, we used number 1 in position two of the code. If they used a different word which differed from the instructions in Czech, the second number in the numerical code was 2. Numbers 3–9 in position 2 of the code of the individual parts of speech focus on phenomena regarding the particular parts of speech. The third number of the code specifies these phenomena even more particularly. After a thorough analysis an encoding table was created.

The encoding of mistakes using this table meant going through all the translated sentences of all the respondents and recording the codes of the mistakes on special sheets. These were then used as input data for computational processing using the software dBase 3+ and Quattro Pro. The specific results were described in the dissertation Stanovení typu a určení frekvence gramatických chyb v němčině u českých žáků (Korcakova, 1996).

For a better understanding of the process, several examples are presented here using the original translated sentences from the 1993 written entrance exams.

Table 1. Examples of the encoding of mistakes (Korcakova, 1996, 83-85)

1.	I wanted to call you. (perfect)	Code(s)
	Ich habe dich anrufen wollen.	-
	<i>Correct solution</i>	
	Ich habe dich anrufen <u>gewollt</u> .	581
	Ich habe <u>dir</u> <u>angerufen</u> wollen.	544, 580
	Ich wollte dir anrufen.	552, 544
	Ich <u>mochte</u> dir <u>angerufen</u> .	552, 521, 544
	Ich habe <u>dir</u> <u>angerufen</u> <u>gewollt</u> .	580, 581, 544
	Ich habe dich anrufen <u>gewollen</u> .	581, 534
2.	Ask your mother about it.	
	Frage deine Mutter danach.	-
	<i>Correct solution</i>	
	Frage deiner Mutter danach.	544
	Frage <u>darauf</u> deiner Mutter.	542, 544

Frage auf es deine Mutter.	542, 670
Frage sich daran deiner Muti.	380, 544, 542, 950
Fragedich daran deiner Mutter.	542, 380, 544, 542
Frage danach seine Mutter.	341
Frag dich danach deine Mutter.	380
<hr/>	
3. It is being spoken about a lot now. (passive)	
Davon wird jetzt viel gesprochen.	-
<i>Correct solution</i>	
<hr/>	
Dafon wird jetzt viel gesprochen.	950
Davon wird <u>man</u> jetzt <u>sehr</u> gesprochen.	620, 575
<u>Man spricht</u> jetzt viel darüber.	573
Es wird jetzt davon viel <u>sprechen</u> .	571
Davon wird <u>es</u> jetzt viel gesprochen.	961
<u>Man spricht von dem</u> .	573, 670, 610, 610

The benefits of the research conducted lay mainly in devising an original encoding table, with whose help the research can be continued, i.e. other occurrences of the mistakes could be encoded and computationally processed.

In the observed sample of 486 respondents, 6,278 mistakes were made during the translation of 12 sentences from Czech to German, i.e. on average each respondent made 13 mistakes. Approximately ¼ of the mistakes were caused by a lack of knowledge of vocabulary and 7/10 of all mistakes concerned orthography, demonstrating that students were not used to writing texts in their previous studies. More than half of the mistakes concerned incorrect grammatical gender. A significant role in this respect seems to have been played by teachers employing an inappropriate methodology of vocabulary instruction as well as the interference of the Czech language regarding grammatical gender. Another reason for these mistakes could have been the fact that Czech does not use articles with nouns and students do not focus sufficiently on the issue regarding gender and articles as they learn vocabulary.

2/5 of all mistakes arose when students were to join two infinitives and more than 1/3 of respondents used the complex infinitive incorrectly (infinitive with "zu"). The origin of this mistake can be seen in the inappropriate incorporation of this subject matter into German textbooks before 1990, when this issue was introduced only at the end of the third year of German language studies. In our opinion this is too late and there is not enough time to practise these particular skills.

The respondents had insufficient knowledge of verb government and especially articles (definite, indefinite and zero). An interesting fact was that the respondents preferred the preterite even in sentences which in terms of meaning required the perfect. This fact may also be connected with the incorrect incorporation of the subject matter (the preterite was first used in textbooks at the end of the first year and was also practised during the entire first half of the second year; only at the end of the second year did students learn about the existence of the perfect). Mistakes also occurred abundantly in not observing sentence structure, in the formation of the imperative, in the formation of plural nouns, in negation, etc.

Regarding the results that emerged from the research in 1990–1993 it is necessary to point out that through the analysis of mistakes it was confirmed that the subject matter in textbooks (which at the time were the same for all types of secondary schools) had been faultily structured; the age of students solving the individual tasks had also been inappropriate. Apart from students in their last year of secondary school working teachers who at the time sought to obtain teaching qualifications in German were also included in the research sample. These were mainly teachers of Russian who after the events of 1989 (the "Velvet Revolution" and the end of the "Iron Curtain") lost their hours in the curriculum because the Russian lessons which had been compulsory at the time were suddenly cancelled. In the case of a lack of knowledge of a particular vocabulary unit the secondary school students used an alternative word so they could continue translating whereas the Russian teachers just disregarded the whole

sentence. The reason was probably the fact that as teachers they were anxious about making a mistake because from the point of view of their profession making mistakes was simply not permissible.

New research project

In spring 2014 at the Department of German Language and Literature of the Faculty of Education a new research project was initiated which is again concerned with determining the frequency and types of mistakes in the written assignments of German students. Unlike the aforementioned project, however, this one does not deal with the analysis of mistakes in entrance tests of applicants for German language studies, but focuses on mistakes students of German make in final written assignments in German after the five-year master's degree program at university. As research material we chose to use the examination papers (essays) of students to become teachers of German from the last five years (2008–2013). They are continuous written essay texts which were composed based on an assigned topic, thus the "interlanguage" of their authors is reflected[†]. A successful completion of the examination paper (essay) is the prerequisite for advancing to national examinations, therefore more than ever students try to achieve the best results possible.

In analysing mistakes the encoding table (adjusted according to current needs) from the initial empirical research in 1990–1993 was applied. As in our previous research a self-contained unit in our set was formed by the so-called word forms, as even in this case it is necessary to quantify the individual units along with other morphological categories which create the particular expressions. The analysis was done on examination papers which had been corrected by native speakers, from whose corrections it is possible to determine the severity of individual incorrect forms. The initial recording of mistakes done by the native speakers was subsequently analysed again with the aim of verifying the consistency among corrections. Next the detected mistakes were classified and encoded using the aforementioned encoding table adjusted according to current needs with regard to the research material – in this phase continuous written texts of the essay type. A new feature of the current research is also the fact that the students in the master's degree program in German teaching are also part of the research team and the work on the project will be a formative experience for their future teaching career.

Following the determination of errors in the papers by native speakers, the mistakes found are currently being analysed and encoded by the previously mentioned master's students, as mentioned also members of the research team. The results so far have been verified by research workers. The process of encoding has not yet been completed (with problematic cases remaining to be resolved) and the data have as yet not been statistically processed. Nonetheless, some preliminary results can already be presented.

Surprisingly, a large number of mistakes fall into the category of lexical-semantic errors. With examination papers the creative productive writing was designed to enable students to use vocabulary of their own choice or otherwise adjust the text content to suit their lexis. During the composition of the examination papers the students could also use monolingual German dictionaries. Despite this possibility there remained a large number of lexical-semantic errors, for example the use of inappropriate expressions for the given context, especially in terms of nouns and verbs. Even when suitable expressions were used, they were often combined incorrectly with other terms which were mutually incompatible.

Concerning morphology, complicated structures were in many cases formed correctly, or alternatively difficult forms replaced by with simpler variants which were also acceptable in the given context. However, the use of articles proved to be quite problematic, a result which is – unlike the research from the 1990s – nonetheless not

[†] In addition to other factors, "interlanguage" develops under the influence of consciously working with mistakes. This issue will be dealt with in the next research project. This pilot project forges new territory in the research into mistake correction by contributing to the mapping of types and frequency of mistakes which students make in written assignments.

based on the lack of knowledge of gender, but of the principles regarding the use of the definite, indefinite and zero article.

Another large area of mistakes concerns verb patterns, with students often using verbs with wrong prepositions; incorrect collocations of nouns and verbs were also common.

Syntax also caused students trouble. There were both the cases of improperly used direct and indirect word order and sentence structure as well as the incorrect arrangement of sentence elements.

Regarding orthographic errors, which in many cases can quite probably be blamed on the students' lack of concentration, errors concerning punctuation stand out. One interesting finding is that the students made mistakes in similar types of sentences, e.g. they used a comma after the expression "Meiner Meinung nach" or separated phrases with "als" with a comma, e.g. "Ich, als Lehrerin..."

The acquired data from the undertaken analysis of mistakes are currently being processed statistically and the results found will subsequently be interpreted. On the one hand, the research findings will be utilised in the follow-up survey, which will focus on the action research of methods of the correction of mistakes made by students studying to become teachers of German. On the other hand, these findings will be employed directly in the classes of the Department of German Language and Literature in the following subjects: morphology of the German language, contemporary German, writing and conversation. The results of the project will also be discussed in methodology lessons.

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